

## What is Anatta ?

*By Bhante Vimalaramsi*

I have been a practicing Buddhist since 1974 and became a Buddhist monk in 1986. The way I came to Buddhism is through the practice of Vipassana meditation. The meditation began with stressing the importance of realizing and explaining of the three characteristics or laws of all existence.

These laws are; Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta, that is, everything is impermanent, a source of suffering, and everything is not-self. As I took one retreat after another these were explained in a variety of ways, which seemed reasonable and even captivating. I listened to many Dhamma talks and began to hear the word Anatta being translated as being "not I, not Me, Not Mine, No Soul", this sounded interesting, but I didn't really understand it. Then I began to hear how we are supposed to push down the "ego" or "self" and be in the present moment. This began to get more and more confusing. Some teachers said that the "ego" or "self" is a bad thing and we should never give into it, whatever that means! The question that always arose for me is what is the "ego" and why is it bad if there isn't supposed to be one?

As the years went by the issue about the "ego" or "self" got more and more confusing. How can a person suppress the "ego" if there reputedly isn't one? Some psychotherapists began saying that in a mentally disturbed person the "ego" has to be built up before it can be let go of. These different ideas about what the "ego" or "self" is and why we have a sub-ego, a normal ego, and a super-ego, seemed to cloud the issue even more.

After some time I wouldn't talk about what "ego" is or where it came from, because quite honestly I didn't understand it. There are even other mental disciplines such as Brahmanism (Hinduism), Islam, and Christianity [with the 'let God take care of it' ideas] that have their own methods of how to make the "ego" or "self belief" smaller. Every time the question of there being a soul or not comes up it seems to be taking this idea of a permanent "self" or "ego" and use words that try to describe it without ever going any further. How are we supposed to understand about the "ego" or "self" if no one has a clear idea of what it is and how it arises?

It seemed that everyone was supposed to know because "ego" is such a common word!

This question had troubled me for more than 20 years [without ever being answered] until I began to look deeply into the original Buddhist texts. I studied about dependent origination (for many years) thinking that the answer was there, as this is the most important part of Dhamma to be realized [it is the detailed version of the 4 Noble Truths]. To my relief I began to see how the English translation of the early 1900's might be a great deal of the trouble, so I began going to the Pali-English dictionaries and seeing if they would help with a more clear definition of Anatta. At the time I was also meditating intensively by following the original Pali suttas as my guide for meditation. It was then the answer began to become clear.

Through meditation I found that I couldn't rely on any of the commentaries about the meditation and went straight to the Satipatthana Sutta (the 4 Foundations of Mindfulness) for instructions in how to practice Mindfulness of Breathing. I looked at several different translations of this and began to see a major difference in the way meditation in the suttas is taught, as compared with what is being taught in the Visuddhi Magga (The Path of Purification). The Visuddhi Magga is supposed to be the encyclopedia of Buddhist Meditation. Yet it just didn't agree with the original suttas.

I began to notice that the basic instructions in meditation were found in just four short sentences. They are: "Breathing in long, one understands, "I breathe in long", or breathing out long, one understands, "I breathe out long". Breathing in short, one understands, "I breathe in short", or breathing out short, one understands, "I breathe out short". This said to me, that the key word was understands, not concentrates only on the breath at the nostril tip, upper lip, or the abdomen, nor does it say to focus so intently on the breath that everything else is ignored. It simply says that one understands when they take a long or short breaths, or understands when the breath is fast or slow, or whether the breath is coarse or fine.

Next the instructions say: "one trains thus: "I shall breathe in experiencing the entire body", or one trains thus: "I shall breath out experiencing the entire body." Again the key words here are one trains thus which is where one begins to do the meditation in earnest. This is where some translations of the original texts begin to change because the translator attempted to put their own belief system into the texts, so they added in brackets [of breath]. This extra addition changed the entire process of the meditation and began to cause some confusion. The bracketed [of breath] tends to force the meditator away from their body, and to focus only on their "breath body". But when that addition is taken out it means the whole physical body and it makes a lot more sense. In other words, on the in or out breath one should experience the entire body. This makes sense when added to the

next part of the instructions. The last part taken from the sutta says: "One trains thus; "I shall breathe in tranquilizing the bodily formation', one trains thus; "I shall breathe out tranquilizing the bodily formation"

This last sentence of the instructions is completely left out of the Visuddhi Magga and other commentaries. The sentence before it is added to it, so as to suit the instructions in the Visuddhi Magga and other commentaries. What this said to me was that my hunch about just going to and following the original suttas was correct. Even though the meditator uses the breath as their base object of meditation there is still more to do. As dependent origination tells us, we must realize that we have both a body and a mind and they both must be tranquilized. If there is tension or tightness anywhere in our body the instructions say to relax and tranquilize it. This is the revolutionary idea of the Buddha's instructions about meditation. When practicing one-pointed absorption meditation it becomes such a strong focus on the mental aspects of the meditation that the body and sensations are not seen at all. This is due to the force of the deep one-pointedness; body is just left behind or ignored.

As I began experimenting with this new/old form of meditation I began to see that every thought or feeling [no matter what kind of thought it was - wholesome or unwholesome] caused tightness to arise in my head, it was a subtle tightness that 20 years of "Vipassana" had never addressed or even noticed.

Seeing this I began to relax that tightness in my head and body as well. Then I began to see that even when there was no tightness in my body or head I could still relax even more. So on the in breath relax, on the out breath relax... a thought arises let it go, relax, softly redirect my attention back to the breath and relax again. If a sensation arose in my mind or body, mind would always go to it and tighten around it with a big mental fist. I came to see that this big mental fist was a type of aversion to that sensation and this caused thoughts to arise about the sensation. Why I didn't like it and wanted it to go away, etc. So first I let the thoughts go, which means I didn't take an interest in them any more... then relaxed the tightness in my head/body... next I let the aversion to the sensation be there, without trying to change it or make it go away. Let it float like it was a bubble in the air without directing it.

I found that the truth of the present moment is when a sensation arises, *it is there* whether I liked it or not, so why fight it... simply let it be there without any resistance to it, then relax the tightness around the sensation and the tightness in my head... I allowed the sensation to be there without liking or disliking it. Next, I gently redirected my attention back to the breath and relaxed... relaxed on the in breath... relaxed on the out breath. The sensation wouldn't go away so my mind went back to it with all of the tension and tightness again. So what to do? Just begin the process again, no matter how many times mind gets drawn to it.

I began to look even more closely at how mind moves and how tension and tightness arises, first before thoughts arose and it became very apparent that this was the whole reason to meditate. That is, to see and understand how mind arises, moves and passes away.

I again looked at how the process of dependent origination worked. I realized that I had a mind and body because I was continually relaxing them. Next I saw that the six-sense bases [that is the eye, ear, tongue, nose, body and mind] were present when there was contact with an external source, such as color and form and the eye-consciousness would arise. Next, feeling arose either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral [this includes both mental or emotional and physical feelings]. Now I came to see the really interesting part is where and how the 'craving' arose. "Craving" is a word that is used often in Buddhism but is never clearly defined. It was always said by other teachers that craving is the wanting mind, now I saw through the meditation that this is where the 'I like it', 'I don't like it' mind arises and that this is where the tightness arises.

Next comes "Clinging" yet another word with a variety of definitions that seem kind of unclear. Many teachers stress that we must let go of "clinging" [meaning to hold on to] because that is where our attachment is, and everyone knows we don't want to be attached. However, I found that the word "clinging" actually referred to all of the thoughts about why we like or dislike the "craving". So "clinging" is the thoughts about... or the mind that makes up the story about why we like or dislike the "craving".

Now let us go back to the original question about Anatta and its definition. As I began observing the way mind works and how it moves from one thing to another I saw a pattern arising and that is not what is the "self" or why is the "ego" arising but how do we stop the "craving" from arising. The real question needs to be HOW does this "craving" arise and manifest; then how do we let it go, so there is no more suffering?

When the "craving" arises in the mediator's head [as tension or tightness] it also arises in their mind [as tension or tightness], and this tightness is the subtle way our false idea in a "self" or "ego" arises. It is "the **I** like it or **I** don't like it mind"! Then the "clinging" mind arises full of thoughts about the like or dislike, but even that doesn't explain it very well. Let's go back to the 3 characteristics and change the definition of some words. Anicca - change... Dukkha - unsatisfactoriness... Anatta - the impersonal nature of whatever arises. The

tightness or craving or the " **I** like it or **I** don't like it mind" has this idea that it is "mine" or "me". When the meditator lets go of this tightness, what happens in mind?

As with the letting go of any tension or tightness in body, it relaxes. Mind becomes open, as opposed to tight and closed, and body becomes loose and tranquilized. There is a feeling of expansion and openness. There is a very clear observation of the present moment and this is where mind is free from that personal belief that all of the thoughts, feelings and sensations that arise are ours. So the impersonal nature of all existence is seen for what it is, just a passing show or part of a process that isn't personal. The meditator doesn't ask for thoughts or feelings to arise, they arise by themselves, so it really is an **impersonal process** . What we do in the present moment dictates whether we suffer or not.

As I went deeper into the tranquilizing of both body and mind many insights began to arise about how everything works and how I cause my own pain and suffering. The five hindrances took on a whole different meaning because this is where the "I" attachment [craving/clinging] is the strongest. I saw that by allowing thoughts and feelings (both physical and emotional) to be, without trying to control them or make them go away, by letting them be there without aversion... then relaxing... then I went back to the meditation object (the breath), there is a deep kind of balance and peace. I clearly saw that by exploring **the way** the hindrances arose is the key to letting them go. I stopped taking things so personally and saw that it was just part of a process rather than a personal drama. It is just the passing show of life. Every time a meditator lets go of thoughts, feelings and sensations, then relaxes, and goes back to their meditation object, they are purifying their mind. Why? Because they are letting go of the tightness or tension caused by this belief that every thing that happens to them is personal or "mine", and they can see more clearly how the process works. How we handle the "craving and clinging" dictates whether we suffer or not.

The real questions are how does "craving and the "ego" arise and how does it manifest in our perception and body. How do we begin to see this, in whatever arises, is part of the impersonal process, instead of it being personally ours to control. The taking of thoughts and feelings personally is where "ego" lives, but the Buddhist perspective shows us that everything is simply part of an impersonal process to watch and let go of.

This term of "letting it go" should briefly be looked at so there won't be any confusion about it. Letting things go means to just let them be without keeping mind directed at them or letting mind get involved with them.

When meditating in the way taught by the original suttas the meditator will experience this cessation of suffering [the third Noble Truth] many times and every time they do have this experience their meditation goes deeper and you will experience joy, happiness, tranquility and equanimity [Jhana factors!]. Plus the beauty of this way of meditating is the meditator can get more and more balance in their daily life. Why? Because the meditation is not just about sitting passively on a cushion. Meditation is about watching the movements of mind and letting go then relaxing and going back to a meditation object during all daily activities. Thus, we gain more and more equanimity and balance.

The meditation object can be the breathe or it can be Loving-Kindness. But the importance of letting go, relaxing and coming back to the meditation object can't be understated. Many meditators have in the past told me that this doesn't work. But as I question them they tell me that they let go and relax without coming back to their meditation object. Of course, it doesn't work if they only use a part of the instructions! In daily activities it is important to follow the instruction completely and always come back to the object of meditation. In this way they can see for themselves the movement of their own mind and begin to see life as part of a process that is impersonal.

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